

Even Rangers Must Pass

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Summary: (Set in Ninja Days)--The Rangers find out they are powerless to save one of their own. (Angst Alert!)

Even Rangers Must Pass

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Disclaimer: If it walks like a Ranger and talks like a Ranger, then it belongs to Saban entertainment and some guy in Japan who had an odd reaction to achovie pizza and large amounts of caffeine before bed.

Author's Notes: As always, eternal thanks and large amounts of chocolate go to Ellen Brand for proofing. I'll consider doing an alternate ending if-and *only* if I get FEEDBACK!!! This is a two tissue story.

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Even Rangers Must Pass

By Gayle F. Cox

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Rain pelted the windows of the red jeep, and the driver sat hunched up behind the wheel. Shoulders tense and knuckles almost translucent as he maneuvered down the road.

Lighting forked out and struck the pavement not thirty feet in front of him. The young man cursed under his breath and swerved around the scorched area.

His breathing became heavier, and he murmured a "Hail Mary" under his

breath. Tree branches were scattered over the road, and the youth missed the sight of the large, thorny branch in front of him. His tire hit it and deflated. Another curse.

Slowly, he stepped out of the car and examined the tire. Water ran down his face, slicking down his unruly brown hair. The red shirt was plastered to his body. Before he could decide on a plan of action, red light surrounded him, and he was teleported to safety.

Rocky stood in the middle of the Command Center, dripping wet, but looking no worse for wear-if you ignored the rare scowl that covered his face.

Zordon looked down from his tube and nodded. "Hello, Rocky."

"Hi."

"Would you like to explain to me what you're doing out on a night like this?"

"Not really."

"It's a very dangerous night."

"So?"

Zordon would have reeled back if his tube had enough space. Whoever was in front of him was certainly not the Rocky he had come to know. "Maybe you should dry off and relax. Alpha will get you some hot chocolate."

"Fine." Rocky turned and headed for the back rooms that housed showers and dry clothers; Zordon had made sure it was fully stocked before allowing Alpha to teleport the Red Ranger.

He reappeared twenty minutes later in a pair of sweatpants and nothing else. Alpha approached with the cocca, and Rocky accepted gratefully before falling into the big easy chair that had appeared out of nowhere.

"Feel better?"

"Yeah, thanks."

The old mage smiled, "You're welcome, now, could I get an explanation?"

"No, I don't feel like talking about it."

"Fine, I understand." Zordon watched Rocky for a moment. Waiting-until-

"It's not right!" the Ranger's outburst was expected, and Zordon waited for him to continue. "I'm only sixteen. My whole life's ahead of me, or it was *supposed* to be. Then this happens!" He slammed his fist against the arm of the chair, and Zordon was thankful he had

gotten extra padding.

The usually happy brown eyes looked up at Zordon tearfully. "Cancer. I have a growth in my stomach. The doctors did a biopsy thing and told me there was nothing they could do but let it run the course. I'm dying, Zordon."

10,000 years of life and fighting could not prepare the mentor for that announcement. He sat, floating in his tube, the only sound coming from the buzz of computers and a few soft "Ay, yi, yi's" from Alpha.

After a long moment, Zordon spoke. "Rocky, son-"

"Save it; I know. You're sorry. Wish you could do something-yada, yada, yada. I've heard it all."

"Rocky-"

"Forget about it! I'm outta here." Without another word, the young man stood-an essence of strength and good-and teleported out of the Command Center.

Zordon turned to Alpha, his voice shaky but even. "Start a search, look over the entire universe-you have to find it."

Alpha's lights blinked a little faster. "Zordon, that's-"

"It's our only chance. Do it." Alpha obliged and started tapping on computer keys. _I have never lost a Ranger, and I *refuse* to start now._

Rocky went home and sat on the roof. The rain had subsided and the whole area smelled clean. _Funny how I never noticed it before. Of course, I wasn't dying then._ The teen sighed and laid back on the shingles. _I guess it's true what they say, you don't notice the little things until they're about to be ripped away from you._

"Hey, Rock, what're you doing up there?"

Rocky glanced down to find Tommy watching him from the sidewalk. "Just thinking. Aren't you out kind of late?"

The White Ranger shrugged and headed for a nearby tree. He climbed it deftly and settled next to his friend. "I guess so, but I was having a bad dream and decided I needed to clear my head."

"Which dream?"

"My usual. Rita showing up and trying to knock me around; you know."

"Rocky nodded, "Yeah, I remember. That makes two this week. You sure you're okay?"

Tommy shrugged again, "I'm fine as far as I can tell. I blame it on the weather."

"Wish it was that easy," Rocky murmured under his breath.

"What?"

"Nothing."

His friend turned serious, Rocky had told him the first day he had found out about the cancer, and he had played anchor for him. "Did you tell Zordon?"

"Yeah, my car got a flat, and he teleported me in. It just kind of spilled out."

"What'd he say?"

A snort of disapproval. "The 'I'm so sorry' crap started so I left."

"Maybe he doesn't know how to react."

"You've got to be kidding. The guy's 10,000 years old. He's had to lose a Ranger somewhere."

Tommy shook his head. "He hasn't."

Rocky raised an eyebrow. "How do you know?"

"Billy."

"Of course." They fell back into silence. "I'm afraid, Tommy."

"Afraid of what?"

"Dying."

His friend glanced at Rocky, "How can you be? After everything you've been through with Zedd and Rita and Tendas and stuff?"

"I don't know. Maybe it's because I haven't done it as long as you or Kim or Billy, but I'm scared out of my mind. I don't know what to do." Rocky studied his bare feet intently.

"Have you told everyone yet?"

"Nope."

"Why not?"

"If they find out, then it'll be 'Poor Rocky'; I don't want that. For however long I have, I want to live a somewhat-normal life." A sickly smile came over the Red Ranger's face, "Minus the Tenga attacks of course."

"Of course."

*****Six Months Later*****

"Hey, Rocky, you feeling okay?" Adam watched his friend, concerned.

"I'm fine."

"You look tired."

"Studied till about two this morning. Big test."

"Maybe you should grab some sleep during lunch."

Rocky nodded, the movement causing pain to go through his head.

"Yeah, maybe. I'll see you."

"Bye." Adam watched his friend walk off and furrowed his brow. Rocky had been acting really strangely the last couple of months. He tapped his communicator. "Zordon?"

"Yes, Adam?"

"Could you run a scan on Rocky? I think something may be wrong. Call it a feeling." He shut off the link and sighed, _I feel like my best friend is slipping away._

Zordon sighed once the connection with Adam was severed. _He should have told them._

Alpha watched worriedly from his console. The last six months had taken their toll on everyone. Constant attacks from Rita and Zedd plus their group of henchmen had worn patience thin for all the Rangers and their backstage crew.

Rocky, especially had been tried constantly. Between fighting and school, the teen, who was already tired enough from the effects of the cancer, was starting to show signs of serious strain. His jokes were still present, but they were less and less as the weeks progressed. The normally hyper young man was beginnig to get dragged down; less time was spent at the Juice Bar and with his friends, and more time was spent at the Command Center talking with Zordon and sleeping in the back room.

Worst of all was the way he was starting to look. Most of his muscle mass was still there, but his face was sunken in, dark circles showed around his eyes some days, and his mouth was absent of the familiar, 'as shucks' smile it usually sported. If Alpha was worried, Zordon was about to explode.

"Any luck, Alpha?"

"None yet, Zordon." The last six months had been centered around finding the one thing that could cure Rocky's cancer. An ancient culture on a planet three galaxies away had the cure, but finding the culture was almost impossible if the person didn't know the habits of the tribe. Alpha and Zordon had a general idea, but not enough to help any great deal.

"Keep searching, they have to be out there somewhere." _And our time's running out much too quickly._

"Yes, Zordon."

"Hey, Rock, wait up!"

Rocky turned around in his chair at the Juice Bar, not wanting to face anyone. His head was killing him and all he wanted was to lie down and get some sleep. "Hey, Billy, what's up?"

"Not much. I just got back from the Command Center, and Zordon and Alpha are acting really testy lately. Have they said anything to you?"

A quick flash of worry went across Rocky's face, but it was gone almost as quickly as it appeared. "Uh, no, they haven't. Maybe Alpha's got his circuits in a knot."

Billy laughed. Lately, Rocky hadn't been making jokes; it was nice to hear one. "Remind me to check that later. You okay, man?"

"Yeah, I'm fine, why?" Rocky said a silent prayer that Billy would drop the subject.

"I don't know; you look kind of worn-out."

"Rita and Zedd have that effect on most people."

Billy stood and clapped his friend on the shoulder. "Grab something to eat that couldn't choke the arteries of a gray humpback whale and get some sleep. I'll see you later."

"Bye, Billy."

"Dad? Dad, I'm home!" Half an hour later Billy walked in the front door of his house and yelled out his usual greeting.

Silence answered him, and he found the note on the fridge stating that a very important project had come up and not to wait up. Billy was somewhat glad his father wasn't home; he needed to work on something and having his father around would only make it more difficult.

The steps to the attic were dusty and a little damp. Billy mounted them carefully, it had been at least five years since he had climbed the stairs, and they were creakier than he remembered.

Brown, weather-beaten boxes scattered the area, but Billy headed straight to the back of the room; he remembered watching his father stack what he was looking for years ago.

The first box opened let up a hail of dust and caused a quick sneezing fit. Reaching down, the Blue Ranger pulled out the first cloth-bound book and opened it slowly. His mother's face smiled up at him, healthy and bright. Nothing like the last year he remembered her.

She had been tired and worn-out. His father had explained it to the eight-year-old as easily as he could.

"Mommy's not-well. She may never get better."

"Mommy has cancer." Even then, Billy was very bright and knew when he was getting the run around.

His father had been shocked at the young boy's perception, but had gathered up enough sense to nod. "Yes, son, Mommy has cancer. It's in her lungs. The doctors don't know how it got there, only that it can't be stopped."

"Mommy's dying."

"Yes, son; Mommy's dying."

Billy snapped out of his memory and concentrated on the pictures. Somewhere in them was the one he needed to make the comparison.

Come on, come on, where is it? The first album went on the floor and another pulled out. _Got it!_ He pulled the plastic film away and removed the picture. It was one of the last one's taken of his mother.

She was still smiling, but it didn't quite reach her eyes. The green eyes were surrounded by dark circles, and her cheeks were sunken. Billy remembered her getting more and more tired and almost passing out sometimes from exhaustion.

Rocky's starting to look like her. He tucked the picture into his pocket. _And Zordon and Alpha know. Can't wait to hear this one._

"Yes, Billy; Rocky is very sick."

"He's got cancer, doesn't he?" The young man's voice raised an octave and choked. "Why hasn't he told the team, Zordon?"

"It was his decision, and he decided not to put the weight on your shoulders."

"We're his friends, that's why he has us."

"Rocky's decision was to keep you uninformed for your own safety."

"How is it for our own safety?"

"If you don't know, you can't worry. How'd you figure it out?" Rocky's voice made Billy turn around.

"My mom died of cancer when I was eight. You're starting to look like she did before she died." The Blue Ranger's voice caught again, and

he looked away, but not before Rocky saw the shimmering start in the other boy's eyes.

"Don't worry, Billy. Zordon and Alpha are tracking down something that can help me."

Zordon looked down from his tube solemnly. "Rocky, we've had no luck."

"I know, but there's always a chance." The hope in the young man's eyes was too much to say no.

"Yes, son, there's always a chance."

*****One Month Later*****

"Rocky, how are you?"

The young man looked up at the doctor and tried to smile, but he didn't feel like smiling. "Hello, Dr. Aaron."

"How are you feeling?"

"How am I supposed to feel?"

Dr. Aaron glanced up from his chart at the other man. "How do you feel?"

"I don't know."

"Why not?"

Rocky let out a whoosh of air, exasperated, "I don't know how I feel because I don't know *what* I'm supposed to feel." He walked over to the single window and glared at the amazingly bright day.

"I'm sixteen and I'm dying. Should I hurt in a certain place? Maybe I should feel pain on a regular basis. Of course, you gave me those pills to stop that."

"Are they helping?"

No, but my powers are. "Yeah, they work. Not that it's going to do much good; I'm going to die anyway."

The Doctor looked at the young man, amazed. Most people with cancer had a hard time accepting the facts, but Rocky had shown amazing capability from the first day. "Yes, you are going to die, but there are treatments--"

"No. I don't want treatment; we already discussed that."

"You could live longer with treatment."

Rocky glared at him, eyes blazing. "And what would I do? Walk around like a living skeleton? Maybe I could sit on my ass and watch my friend's faces as they realize what's going on. I've already seen what that looks like twice," _I'm sorry, Billy._ "And I never want to see it again. Treatment is not an option."

"Ro-"

"No. Now let's get on with this."

Dr. Aaron decided to let it go. Rocky hopped onto the examining table and leaned back. All went well until the Doctor's hands landed below his ribs and to the left.

"*Damn.*"

"Pain?"

For a Doctor, this guy sure is clueless. "No, I always do that when someone touches me there. Don't you?"

The Doctor ignored him and pressed a little harder.

"Do you *mind*?"

"You're cynical for sixteen."

Rocky gave him another glare. _Gee, I wonder why?_ "No, I'm cynical for any age."

"What did the doctor say?" Billy's first words when Rocky teleported into the Command Center made Zordon glance up.

In the last month, Billy and Rocky had become closer than any of the other Rangers, and Zordon was afraid it was going to be harder for both of them to accept the truth when it finally stared them in the face. Tommy was still in the loop, but he had shown signs of breakdown any time Rocky mentioned his condition, so they had stopped filling him in on the details unless he asked.

"It's spreading. Past my stomach, starting to cover the lower half of my body." Any sign of feeling was gone, Rocky had come to a point where telling Billy or Zordon updates on his condition had started sounding like a grocery list.

The Blue Ranger grimaced inwardly. _He's taking this really hard. Of course, I probably would be too._ "What about-"

"Treatment? No, Billy. We already discussed that. I am *not* going to let you guys watch me fade away slower just because some medicine can keep me alive for a few more days. When it's time to go, it's time to go. That's what I was always taught."

Zordon finally interjected, "Rocky, it could help."

"That's what you're here for, Zordon. You're going to find that tribe."

The Command Center was silent.

"Yes, Rocky."

*****Three Months Later*****

"Tengas!" The yell from Tommy caused all the Rangers to turn and throw down their bookbags.

Rocky cursed under his breath. He was feeling horrible that day. A doctor's appointment the day before had assured him that the cancer was still spreading. The news on top of a regular day of school and having to pretend to be fine had worn him down more quickly than usual.

"We need Ninja Power, now!"

The six Rangers threw themselves into the fight, Rocky hardest of all. _I refuse to give up. I totally refuse._

He had made it through six Tengas before one got in a lucky shot in the stomach, and he felt the power drain from his body. _The power's supposed to keep me from hurting._

"Rocky, you okay?" Billy was leaning over him seconds later, checking his friend with extreme care.

"My powers-" Rocky halted and tried to breathe.

"They protect you, but your physical body has a lot to do with it. When it starts to wear, your powers wan where you hurt the most."

"It wans where the cancer's the worst. I thought they were supposed to gather around a weak area."

"They do, but since it's-"

"The others are coming."

Billy and Rocky quieted and stood together.

They all demorphed and Adam slapped his friend on the back, not noticing the falter in the other man's step. "You were a little slow today, Rock. What's the matter? Getting tired of the same old routine?"

The others laughed, and Rocky forced a small smile. "Yeah, something like that."

*****Four Months Later*****

Rocky approached the large structure slowly. He had been coming every week since he was seven, but today, for some reason, he felt uneasy.

The box was familiar, and Rocky stepped in the small area comfortably. Quickly, he crossed himself and grasped his crucifix tightly. "Bless me, Father, for I have sinned. It has been one week since my last confession and since then I have cursed and lied."

"Why have you lied, my son?" The priest's voice brought comfort to the young man.

Deep breaths, Rock. Deep breaths. "I'm dying, Father, and I can't

tell them."

"Why not?"

"Because if I did, they would have to suffer with my pain."

"Sometimes giving pain to your friends can give you strength."

"We share pain, Father, but this is different."

"Why is that?"

"Because Power Rangers aren't supposed to die." Standing, Rocky hurried out of the confessional, not looking back.

*****Two Months Later*****

"I'm doing the tournament, Billy."

The blonde leaned against one of the counters in his lab and shook his head in disbelief. "Rocky, you're getting weaker every day, the doctor's given you three months-at the *most* and said that competing could kill you."

"I can't stop, Billy. If I stop I have to face the fact that I'm dying. I'll never be ready for that, no matter how sick I get. Please, accept that."

"Fine, I accept it, but who's going to explain to the others why you're doing a kamikaze tournament?"

A wide smile-something that was becoming rarer and rarer as the weeks progressed-spread across Rocky's face. "So glad you asked."

"I will *not*--"

"Billy, please, I need someone who isn't floating in a tube to explain to the team why I had to do it. *Please*."

*****Two Months Later*****

Rocky was gone. He had been at the tournament, even near the end he refused to quit the martial arts that he loved so much and had been thrown out of the ring. The fall hadn't hurt him much, his back had gotten stiff, but the exertion of the match had gotten to him.

The doctor had come down the hall and watched the faces in front of him. All the Rangers-old and new-had shown up to find out how their friend was. When Rocky had been rushed to the hospital, Billy had finally told the others what was going on.

"He's got cancer. He's had it for a year and a half. Rocky's dying, guys."

"Should he have done the match?" Tommy asked.

A slow shake of the head, "No, he shouldn't, but you know Rocky, once he sets his mind to it, he refuses to quit. He refused to quit."

"Why didn't he tell us?" Adam's voice was barely above a whisper.

"He didn't want to force us to carry it. I only found out because..my mom..same thing...kind of." Billy snapped out of his memories, "Rocky wouldn't allow it. No matter how hard Zordon or I pushed him he wouldn't budge. It was his decision."

Total silence fell over the lobby. Kim and Aisha had come back from their different areas after getting the news from Tommy and Adam. They sat with Kat, half sobbing, half murmuring comfort to each other.

Adam, Tommy, Jason, and Zack were huddled on the couch, fists tight, brows scrunched up. Tears were running down their faces silently.

Tanya and Justin stood on the fringes, not sure what to do. Rocky was their friend, but not like these guys. Trini walked over and gave them each a hug. Telling them they could help comfort the others if nothing else.

Two days later, the teens were still in the waiting room when the doctor walked down the hall. Rocky's mother and siblings were the first to notice the older man. "My son?"

A shake of the head. "I'm sorry, Mrs. DeSantos, but your son is-

"Dead." Mrs. DeSantos murmured. "My son is dead. Thank you, doctor." With all the dignity the Rangers had seen in Rocky from the very first, she turned and walked away, her children following quietly behind.

"Zordon, answer me one question."

"Yes, Billy?"

"Did Rocky have a chance a year ago when he mentioned that cure?"

Silence.

"Answer me."

"No, Billy, he did not have a chance. The one tribe we found disappeared before we could contact them."

"You didn't tell him."

"How could I? It would tear away the last hope he had."

"Even now you think you made the right decision?"

"Yes, I do."

"Thank you, Zordon."

*****Twenty Years Later*****

"Zordon, who's that?" A young woman with dark hair and a helmet under one arm glanced at a picture that adorned one of the back walls of the Power Chamber. It was of a young man with bright eyes and somewhat unruly brown hair who seemed to be smiling straight at Zordon.

The old mage looked toward the picture and smiled faintly, "That's the one who got away." He murmured to himself, sadness creeping into his voice.

"What?"

"He's the bravest Ranger you would have ever known."

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The End

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